

## BOOK REVIEW

NELSON, CHARLES E. and ALLAN PROBERT. 1994. **A Man Who Can Speak of Plants.** (ISBN 0 9524847 06, pbk). privately published by Dr. E. Charles Nelson, 14 Connaught Parade, Phibsborough, Dublin 7, Ireland, \$30.00, 181 pp, 8 color plates, 52 b/w.

This book is the life story of Dr. Thomas Coulter (1793–1843), an Irish botanist that lived and worked in Mexico and California in the 1820s and 1830s. He was a physician and also a naturalist with broad interests in animals and plants. He discovered and his name is forever enshrined as part of the binomial for the big-cone pine (*Pinus coulteri*) and the white-blossomed poppy, matilija (*Romneya coulteri*). His plant collections, especially of Mexican cacti, were distributed to botanical gardens in Europe.

His talents extended far beyond the study of botany, including insects and reptiles, and activities such as angling, shooting, managing silver and lead mines, and as a surveyor. The book is organized chronologically, tracing his life from youth in a beginning chapter Child and university student (1793–1820); his middle years Student of Botany (1820–1824) - 15 pages; Miner and physician in Mexico (1824–1829) - 60 pages; Explorer and plant-hunter in California (1829–1834) - 21 pages; to his final failing health and death 'A wreck of a man' his final decade (1834–1843). His failing health and early death limited his publication productivity once his collecting days were over.

The botanical content of this book is rather limited when compared to Coulter's other life activities. One of the highlights of Coulter's botanical career was his study and monograph of the Dipsacaceae (teasel and scabious family) under the tutelage of the famous botanist Augustin-Pyramus de Candolle of Geneva, Switzerland. Coulter's trip to lower California has commentary about the excessive heat, his poor health and the lack of interesting plants. Here he meets David Douglas who is a Scottish botanist collecting plants for William Hooker of the Royal Horticultural Society of London. The title of this book comes from a letter written by Douglas that praises Coulter for his botanical work and refers to him as "a man who can speak of plants." Many of Coulter's collections come from the environs of Monterey where he found the big cone pine, *Pinus coulteri*, and four other new species of pines. The beautiful white flowered Matilija poppy was named to honor Coulter by his friend Dr. Romney Robinson, *Romneya coulteri*. This beautiful species is surely Coulter's finest memorial and was introduced into cultivation in Europe about 1875. William Harvey described new genera from Coulter's California's collections: *Lyrocarpa coulteri* and *Dithyrea californica* (Brassicaceae, the cabbage family); *Whitlavia grandiflora* and *W. minor* in the Hydrophyllaceae; and *Berginia virgata*. Many of Coulter's collections are at Trinity College, Dublin where he established this famous herbarium with his own New World collections. He is also noted for his famous pine cone collection. He never published any papers on his Mexican and California collections and named no new species from America.

Appendix I provides a glossary of Spanish words and mining terms. Appendix II provides the original texts of Coulter's letters about upper California to the Royal Geographical Society of London. Appendix III has Thomas Coulter's herbarium specimens, but this is not a complete listing of all the new taxa based on Coulter's collections. Such a list may not have been possible to compile but it certainly would provide valuable reference information.

Anyone interested in the floras of Mexico and California will welcome this book as an important source of botanical history on plant exploration in the early 1800s.—*Harold W. Keller, Research Associate, BRIT.*